Alberta Grade 12
Examination Study

A study commissioned by

The Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement (MACOSA)

Fred J. Dumont,
Study Director

November, 1977

Alberta

The Minister's Advisory Committee
on Student Achievement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study, funded and administered by the Planning and Research Branch, Alberta Education, was conducted as a series of interrelated and sequential sub-projects: literature searches, policy document analyses, examination and synthesis of local, regional and provincial mark trend studies, questionnaire survey and personal interviews. Many, many individuals contributed to these activites.

The Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement (MACOSA) first wishes to acknowledge the yeomen efforts of the members of the Study Steering Committee which met numerous times and provided advice and direction to Fred J. Dumont, who conducted the study.

The willing participation of the many Alberta citizens, and administrative units and staff associated with the schools selected to participate, is acknowledged with deep appreciation.

A number of other people, too numerous to mention, deserve thanks and appreciation. These include officials of Alberta Education, Alberta Treasury, Alberta Municipal Affairs, and the Regional Offices of Education.

To all of the above, and to others not mentioned who contributed to the study, MACOSA expresses appreciation.

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AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GRADE 12 EXAMINATIONS STUDY

Introduction

THE QUESTION ASKED

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION SINCE COMPULSORY GRADE 12 EXAMINATIONS WERE DROPPED IN 1973?

The Study was designed to attempt to answer this question which was asked by the Legislative Assembly of Alberta on October 19, 1976.

Background

In October of 1976, the Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement (MACOSA) was established by the Hon. Julian Koziak, Minister of Education, in response to growing concerns about the level of student achievement in Alberta. MACOSA was charged with the tasks of studying the elements of student achievement including definition, purposes and principles underlying achievement and to consider recommending ways and means to assess, maintain and improve student achievement. The GRADE 12 EXAMINATION STUDY was one of a number of projects commissioned by MACOSA to discharge its responsibilities. The funding and administration of these projects were undertaken by the Planning and Research Branch, Alberta Education. A Steering Committee composed of members drawn from various publics was established by MACOSA in January 1977 to oversee the designing, commissioning and completion of the study in time to allow the Minister of Education to table the responses to the question during the fall session of the Legislative Assembly.

Study design

In fulfilling its mandate the Study asked three questions:

(a) WHAT ARE THE CURRENT GRADE 12 STUDENT EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND SCHOOL LEVEL ACROSS THE PROVINCE?

(b) WHAT CHANGES HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS AWARDED BY THE SCHOOLS IN GRADE 12 SUBJECTS IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?

(c) WHAT DO THE STAKEHOLDER PUBLICS THINK HAS HAPPENED TO QUALITY OF EDUCATION SINCE ACCREDITATION, AND WHAT DO THEY THINK OUGHT TO HAPPEN NOW?

Findings

(a) The first question: WHAT ARE THE CURRENT GRADE 12 STUDENT EVALUATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES AT THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND SCHOOL LEVEL ACROSS THE PROVINCE?

The survey involved contacting all superintendents in the province by letter. These letters

provided an explanation of the survey's aim and asked for copies of: (a) school board evaluation policy statements and regulations, (b) high school policy manuals, and (c) individual high school rules and regulations. A second letter was sent to further explore; (a) the extent of differentiation between policy and practices, and (b) the concerns of the systems' administrations with respect to problems associated with policy implementation monitoring within their systems.

As indicated in the following table, over 75 percent of the school systems offering grade 12 instruction to an estimated 90 percent of the Alberta grade 12 student population responded to the survey. Only nine of these systems had not developed an implicit or explicit grade 12 student evaluation policy.

TABLE I

Present status of evaluation policies of Alberta school systems offering grade 12 instruction.

Types of System	Divisions	Counties	Public School District	*Sep. School District
Types of Evaluation Policies	1 = 30 2 = 28 3 = 22 4 = 3520 5 = 14% 6 = 79	1 = 30 2 = 29 3 = 21 4 = 4870 5 = 19% 6 = 72	1 = 29 2 = 23 3 = 16 4 = 13700 5 = 47% 6 = 70	1 = 25 2 = 22 3 = 18 4 = 4505 5 = 17% 6 = 82
Explicit Policy (65)	N = 15 (68)	N = 13 (62)	N = 12 (75)	N = 10 (56)
Implicit Policy (24)	N = 5 (23)	N = 4 (19)	N = 3 (19)	N = 6 (34)
No Policy (11)	N = 2 (9)	N = 4 (19)	N = 1 (6)	N = 2 (10)
No Response (24) [a]	N = 6 (21)	N = 8 (28)	N = 7 (30)	N = 4 (18)
Not Offering Gr. 12 Instruction N = 43	N = 2 (6)	N = 1 (3)	N = 6 (21)	N = 34 (61)

* Includes Regionals and Consolidates
(a) from systems offering grade 12 instruction
( ) percentage.

1 = operating systems as of December 31, 1976
2 = operating systems offering grade 12 instruction as of December, 1976
3 = reporting systems offering grade 12 instruction
4 = number of grade 12 students receiving instruction in reporting systems
5 = percentage of total Alberta grade 12 population
6 = percentage of systems reporting.

School systems have generally adopted the "Lethbridge policy" or some version of it which incorporates Alberta Education's "fair and just" concepts. However, the question as to how this policy is being applied at the school level in different systems may be a very crucial one. Regulations devised to implement the "Lethbridge policy" vary from school system to school system. In some cases individual subject teachers work out their own course outlines and evaluation procedures while in other cases it is done by all the subject teachers within the school, or in other cases by all the teachers of a subject within the school system. Conversely, in some school systems, course outlines and evaluation procedures are very detailed and prescriptive. In other cases school systems establish subject committees to develop common course outlines, evaluation procedures and weighting factors for grading to be used by all teachers within the same subject throughout the system.

It is interesting to note the changes that have been effected in the "blueprint" policy by its "architects". Recently the Lethbridge School District, No. 51, has implemented an objective based educational program in English 30 and Mathematics 30. All teachers in both high schools are expected to teach their students mastery of this core before a C letter grade (50-64%)is awarded. If a student does not master the core, the teacher must give a mark of D or F (0-49%).

An analysis of statements made by superintendents in response to the question posed with respect to the extent of differentiation between policy at the system level and practice at the local school level provides a basis for concluding that there exists an urgent need to examine ways of improving the design of the school systems' monitoring mechanisms. Superintendents consider the apparent lack of consistency in application of policy in actual operations in schools within the same system specifically, and throughout the province generally, a major obstacle in maintaining credibility with the public. They, as a group, question the accuracy with which their principals and teachers from year to year, perceive the policy statement and its intended results. The options left open to schools have allowed for the development of a variety of "inventions" of means as years go by, thus making it difficult if not impossible for the superintendent to keep the public informed on what is happening in their schools and how well it is happening.

In other words, the latitude afforded for action, based upon specific situations and local community circumstance which is in theory likely the most effective approach to utilize, causes many problems for the superintendent. The superintendent, who perceives himself as the ultimate authority on promotion, is in the "nightmarish" situation of having to assure his board that the evaluation is a carefully planned and defensible operation, yet he cannot be fully aware of all the "inventions" being used by the professional staff to accomplish the end. Some of the concerns and problem areas perceived by the superintendents, were the following:

(a) The increase of students' averages and subject grade averages at all levels of the senior high school; (b) The marked difference in evaluative criteria between schools operating under the same policies in the same system; (c) The evidence that students are not kept aware of their standing, in spite of the operational procedures developed, at the system level to assure that this is done; (d) The lack of standardization of methods of student evaluation

throughout the province; (e) The lack of confidence by the public in the educational system, particularly with the instruction in the basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic); (f) The apparent inability of schools today (1977) to challenge students with respect to competency, accuracy, discipline, quality and responsibility; (g) The apparent lack of progress toward the development of new courses and modification of programs to meet the needs of the students and to suit local conditions.

(b) The second question: WHAT CHANGES HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THE DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS AWARDED BY SCHOOLS IN GRADE 12 SUBJECTS IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS?

The Reid Study [1] which related to the province at large reported that since compulsory examinations were dropped in 1973 there has been a general increase in marks awarded by school staffs in all subjects with the exception of those awarded in Chemistry 30 X and Physics 30 X. At the grade 10 and 11 levels the distribution during the period 1967-68 to 1975-76 shows there was an increase in the percentage in both the "A" and "B" grades awarded with a corresponding decrease in the "C", "D" and failure categories.

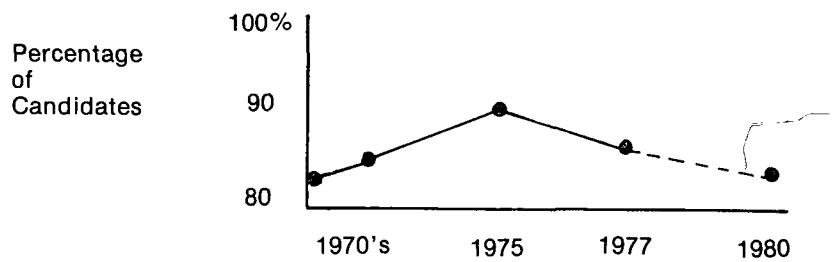
The school system data analysis established that the changes observed by Reid [2] were general throughout all reporting areas. Taking all reporting systems as a group, the data support the following generalizations. First, the typical line of mark trend since the 70's was a slight increase to 1973, followed by a steady increase in all test subject areas up to 1975. A slight drop was evident in 1976 and 1977. A continuation of this trend to 1980 would likely result in a return to the five year average established under the former system of compulsory examinations, as seen in the following table.

1. Reid, J.E. "A Comparison of Grade 12 Achievement 1966-67 to 1968-69 and 1972-73 to 1975-76". Alberta Education, May, 1977.

2. op. cit,.

TABLE II

General trend line of marks awarded (50% or better) in all former grade 12 examinations.



Second, the data clearly indicate that there exists a marked difference in evaluative criteria between schools in the same system as well as amongst systems throughout the province.

(c) The third question: WHAT DO THE STAKEHOLDER PUBLICS THINK HAS HAPPENED TO QUALITY OF EDUCATION SINCE ACCREDITATION, AND WHAT DO THEY THINK OUGHT TO HAPPEN NOW?

The design of the component of the study that sought this information included the features which were intended to encourage participation: (a) The questionnaire format and printing style were attractive; (b) The direct mail participants received a postage paid, self-addressed envelope for return of the questionnaire; (c) The teachers and students were reached as a group through the principal of the high schools selected to participate; (d) An explanatory letter requesting approval of the participating sample school was sent to each superintendent. On receipt of an affirmative response the principal of each of the sample schools was contacted. When the principal agreed that the school would participate, the questionnaires for the students and teachers of the school were sent with a covering letter and instructions for distribution and return.

In addition, interviews were conducted with a three percent sample of adults. The interview was structured to perform a validation function, as well as to determine: (a) whether the questions were clear to the respondents, (b) whether respondents had additional ideas regarding what has happened to the quality of education since 1973, (c) what reasons respondents had for their answers to key questions. Generally the findings gleaned from personal interviews validate the information contained in the completed questionnaires received from all non - student respondents in the survey sample.

Basically, the questionnaire asked for answers to four questions about standards of achievement of grade 12 students: (a) What is happening? (b) What had led up to this situation - that is, what has happened in the past? (c) What is wanted? By whom? (d) What should be done?

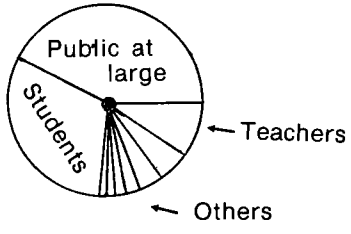
The answers to these questions were sought by asking the respondents to react to 96 items categorized as follows: (a) what do you think has happened? 68 items, five of which were spaces for respondent statements, (b) what do you think ought to happen? 20 items, two of which were spaces for write-in statements, and (c) personal characteristics? six items dealing with such matters as educational level, length of stay in Alberta, experience with departmentals, and whether or not the respondent was a parent.

A total of 4,476 respondents made 393,360 observations. Omissions in item responses, and blanks in comment spaces account for the difference between recorded observations and the maximum possible (434,172). In the analyses of these observations the printable written comments were retrieved from each questionnaire, and classified according to groups and recorded. (The complete text is on file with Alberta Education). Then, the most typical responses were selected for inclusion in the exemplar sections of the study. An additional list of comments classified as responding to the "WHAT IS" and "WHAT OUGHT TO BE?" questions of the study was compiled.

TABLE III

Who was asked to participate?

N = 6,800

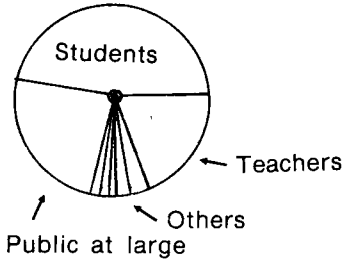


Public	43%
Students	32
Teachers	9
Employers	6
Principals	4
Trustees	2
Consultants	2
Superintendents	1
Post secondary	1
	100

TABLE IV

Who participated?

N = 4,476



Students	48%
Public	23
Teachers	13
Principals	6
Employers	4
Consultants	2
Superintendents	2
Trustees	1
Post secondary	1
	100

TABLE V

Survey participants.
From where in Alberta?

Rural and small urban centres	56%
Edmonton and Calgary	44%

What has happened?

Generally most respondents think that changes have occurred in the past five years. Respondents from outside the professional educational community tend to feel that the change has been for the worse. Insiders may be more knowledgeable, or they may be too close to the situation to make accurate judgements. Outsiders might be merely nostalgic, or they may view the scene with a greater degree of detachment. One thing is true-there are differing points of view held by the majorities in the two groups.

As a factor in the change, examination withdrawal was rated below lifestyle factors in all groups. In the educational groups it was far behind.

It seems clear that the various groups saw a lack of common standards across the province as being a problem. The examinations were viewed as comparable guideposts and nothing appears to have replaced them for this function.

The withdrawal of examinations seems to have allowed more program flexibility but this has not necessarily meant better provisions for individual students. The main effect on teachers has been increased professional responsibility. It may be true that there are as many interpretations of professional responsibility as there are teachers, and each teacher working in a defensible fashion would not necessarily produce common standards.

In considering arguments for and against bringing departmental examinations back, there are three common ones against such a move: (a) evaluation should be on the year's work, (b) the multiple choice format is too restrictive, and (c) non-examination subjects tend to be treated as

second class subjects. Of course two of these objections could be overcome by using different examination practices. The first is more difficult. Arguments that seemed favorable to the return of examinations were the maintenance of comparable standards across the province and certification of a known level of achievement. Interestingly enough, even though the majority of respondents agreed with the latter reason, there was nothing in the grade twelve departmental examinations that were conducted that guaranteed this. Also, although students could be compared within a year, there was no guarantee of comparability across years.

The arguments surrounding the departmental examinations are not simple ones. Some of the intentions that surrounded their withdrawal may not have been realized, others have. Societal change has confounded the issue, making it difficult to reach a clear perception of "What has happened"?

What ought to happen?

It appears that the "non-educationist" groups would like to see the return of the compulsory examination system. Most would appear to prefer a system that involved a mixture of teacher marks and departmental marks. If such a move were taken by the department, it seems clear that sole reliance on the multiple choice format would not find favor with these groups. Also, careful thought would have to be given to the non-examination subjects so that they would not be sacrificed. Some provision for local flexibility would appear necessary. Also, there is strong support from all fronts for the need for specifying the curriculum objectives and evaluation procedures before the students get too far into the course. Teachers, principals, and to some extent other educators who are somewhat removed from the classroom, are less enthusiastic than the other groups surveyed about a return to a compulsory departmental examination system. To some readers, this may seem self-serving. However, the teachers were deeply involved in all aspects of the former departmental examinations, and were probably the only group who had first hand experience with the inadequacies of the system. Also, the pendulum of opinion swings back and forth, and it often happens that the school and especially the teacher is constantly called upon to adjust teaching styles to meet the current opinion. Possibly this leaves some teachers with a pessimism about simple solutions to complex problems.

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

There is no easy answer to a question as complex as that posed by the Legislative Assembly, since part of the answer depends on which concept of "quality" one has in mind. Implicit in the question is the notion that it might be restated as "all things being equal", has there been a change in student achievement caused by the withdrawal of compulsory departmental examinations? Of course all other things cannot be equal. There have been many changes in society in general, and in the educational scene in particular that could have affected student achievement. Some of these changes would include changes in curriculum, changes in the pool of knowledge and changes in lifestyle. To isolate the effects of examination withdrawal is an impossible task.

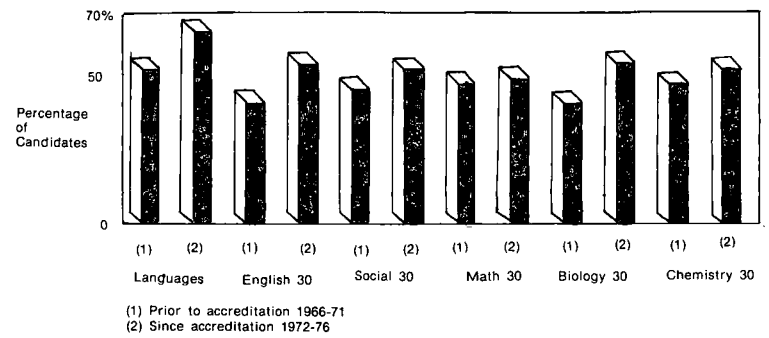
If "quality of education" means the amount that students know or their abilities to reason or create, then the

Study concludes from available data that the question cannot be answered. No data exist upon which a valid comparison can be made. Within the short period available the Study was unable to administer copies of examinations which would represent the content covered by examinations administered by the department. Indeed, there is some doubt that such examinations would provide a fair comparison in view of changes in curriculum that have taken place.

If "quality of education means standards of student achievement, then the Study finds that an answer can be attempted. Taking the narrow definition of standard of achievement as a letter grade A, B, C, D, F, performance rating or pass versus fail, and assuming that the inherent level of ability of Alberta students remains about the same from one year to the next, it is the Study's conclusion that in most school districts, and in most subjects, relatively more "A" grades are awarded now than prior to the withdrawal of compulsory departmental examinations. In other words, one of the consequences of the withdawal of departmental examinations has been "grade inflation".

TABLE VI

Chart reflecting increase in number of students awarded "B" or better marks in various subjects.

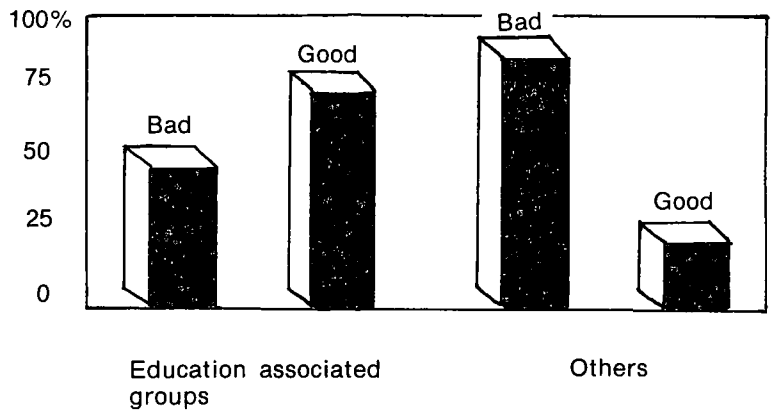


If "quality of education" is taken to mean the perceptions of people in Alberta about the "quality of education", the Study finds that changes in the "quality of education" have taken place. It appears that most Albertans think that there has been a reduction in student effort, an increase in the opportunity to adapt curriculum to local needs, an increase in professional freedom and responsibility, a general decrease in the level of achievement and a reduction in comparability of grading practices. However, although the majority of Albertans appear to perceive that "quality of education" has changed, those most closely associated with the educational community tend to have a more optimistic view of the direction of change, than members of the public at large. Few

respondents saw the withdrawal of examinations as the most important factor in bringing about the changes, but the public appears to attribute more importance to it than did groups such as teachers and principals.

TABLE VII

Influence of withdrawal of examinations on "quality of education".
Chart reflecting differences in perceptions amongst various groups.



STUDY STEERING COMMITTEE COMMENTARY

The Study Steering Committee found it difficult to establish the relative values of these changes. For some members of the Committee, the potential engendered by increased curricular flexibility outweighs the lack of provincial benchmarks. For others, the perceived reduction in student effort is a primary issue. These examples of differences in viewpoints amongst the Study Steering Committee members reflect the many divergent views of most Albertans. Many conditions have affected the quality of education in Alberta since the withdrawal of departmental examinations. Although members of the Committee have differing views on the importance of such examinations the Committee is united in its belief that bringing back the examinations will not necessarily return the situation to what it was. The Committee agrees also that the Study provides evidence of a loss of public confidence in the educational system over the past few years, and that there is likely some basis for this loss. The impact of public confidence upon education cannot be ignored. Because of the perceived decline in actual achievement as opposed to the rise in marks, because of the general decline in public confidence in the educational system, and because there is always room for improvement of educational practices, the Committee believes that steps must be taken to improve the quality of education and particularly the procedures for evaluation.

MACOSA CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

In viewing the findings of the Grade 12 Examinations Study, the **Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement** recognizes that there is serious concern about educational quality. The groups involved in the study definitely desire that something be done about educational quality. At the same time there is

considerable reluctance on the part of the various publics to return to the pre-1973 form of examinations. Though the system of accreditation is not working as well as it might, the **Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement** believes that the system can be made to work. Therefore, the **Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement** recommends:

THAT THE MINISTER EXTEND THE PROVISIONS OF THE EXISTING ACCREDITATION POLICY FOR A MINIMUM OF THREE YEARS, SUBJECT TO REVIEW AFTER THAT PERIOD, AND FURTHER THAT THE NECESSARY STEPS BE TAKEN TO ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EXISTING POLICY WITH RESPECT TO STUDENT EVALUATION.

The Minister's Advisory Committee on Student Achievement regards this recommendation as interim and general. Further studies presently in progress will provide specific information as to some of the necessary steps that should be taken to enhance the effectiveness of the existing policy.

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